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ABSTRACT

Before- and after-school care arrangements for third- and fifth-grade students were investigated, with specific attention given to the extent of self-care arrangements, satisfaction levels of parents and children using self-care, and variables contributing to satisfaction. The sample included 675 students attending Newington Elementary School in Summerville, South Carolina, during the 1981-1982 school year. An initial questionnaire, delivered by the children to their parents or guardians, solicited information regarding marital and employment status and, if applicable, care arrangements provided for children during parental absence. Parents who had children in self-care responded to questions regarding the structure of these arrangements and their satisfaction with this type of care. Ten third-grade and 10 fifth-grade students in self-care were interviewed regarding the following aspects of the time they spent alone: activities, rules and regulations, contact with parents, emergency instructions, and satisfaction with their care arrangements. Five independent variables (amount of time spent weekly in self-care, sex of child, grade level, presence of sibling, and voluntary or involuntary use of self-care) were selected for multiple regression analysis in an attempt to explain the variance in the dependent variable of parental satisfaction. Results are discussed. (RH)

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CHILDREN IN SELF-CARE: AN EXPLORATORY STUDY

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A SUMMARY OF THE STUDY

This study investigated care arrangements, before and after school, for third and fifth grade students. The focus of the study was to explore 1) extent of self-care arrangements (children alone at home or with siblings up to 17 years of age), 2) satisfaction levels for parents and children using self-care, and 3) variables that contribute to satisfaction with self-care arrangments for parents and children.

The sample was 675 third and fifth grade students who attended Newington Elementary School in Summerville, S.C. during the school year 1981-1982. An initial questionnaire was delivered by the children to their parents or guardians. This questionnaire solicited information regarding marital and employment status and, if applicable, care arrangements provided for the children during parental absence.

Parents who had children in self-care arrangements responded to questions regarding the structure of these arrangements and their satisfaction with this type of care. Ten third and ten fifth grade students in self-care were interviewed regarding the following aspects of the time they spent alone: activities, rules and regulations, contact with parents, emergency instructions, and satisfaction level with their care arrangements.

Five independent variables, (1) amount of time spent weekly in self-care, (2) sex of child, (3) grade level, (4) presence of sibling, and (5) voluntary or involuntary use of self-care were selected for multiple regression analysis, attempting to explain variance in the dependent variable, parental satisfaction. Stepwise multiple regression indicated that these variables accounted for 34% of the variance in parental satisfaction level, with the largest portion, 29%, being taken up by the variable voluntary or involuntary use of self-care arrangements. Sex of child accounted for 2.7% and amount of time spent weekly in self-care, 1.6% of the variance.

CHILDREN IN SELF-CARE: AN EXPLORATORY STUDY

Martha Stewart

Running Head: Self-Care

Children in Self-Care: An Exploratory Study

The continued increase in numbers of mothers joining the work force has spurred social science researchers to investigate the effects of maternal employment on children in the family. Although "The overwhelming consensus of different studies is that most children of working mothers seem to develop normally and well" (Moore & Hofferth, 1979, p. 145), one of the important factors that affects the impact of a mother's working on her children is the quality of substitute care they experience in her absence. For an estimated two to four million children (Newsweek, 1981), substitute care is given by themselves or by a sibling for an unknown amount of time--daily or weekly--for an unestablished duration. The vagaries in the preceding sentence are a reflection of the lack of data available on the growing phenomenon of children in self-care (without adult supervision) arrangements. An occasional article in a popular periodical reflects parental concern and conjecture. A perusal of scientific journals yields almost nothing.

The problem identified by this study was to provide descriptive and analytical data in an area that is just beginning to be addressed by empirical research. Of initial interest were data on how many children are in self-care arrangements. A second area of emphasis was whether parents are satisfied with their children's self-care arrangements,

and if so, why? Of particular interest were data from the children themselves about their perceptions of their self-care arrangements, how satisfied they are staying alone or with siblings, and what they believe contributes or detracts from their satisfaction levels.

Four research questions were identified as salient to the purpose of this study:

1. What is the extent of self-care arrangements among a population of third- and fifth-grade children?
2. How satisfied are parents and children with self-care arrangements for the children?
3. Are there significant differences between levels of satisfaction for parents and children?
4. What are the variables that contribute to satisfaction for parents and children?

Review of Related Literature

Extent of Self-Care

Data on the number of children in self-care arrangements in the U.S. are conflicting and scarce. Newsweek (1980) identified two million "latch key" children; by 1981, the same magazine claimed the number of children in self-care could be as high as four million. Rodman (1977), using 1974 census data on children between the ages of 7 and 13 years, reported that 1.8 million or 7% of these children were in self-care arrangements. A problem with census data in

precise identification is the cut-off point of 7 years of age (most children alone in self-care and those who are accompanied by siblings during the hours without adult supervision (Rodman, 1982).

Apparently, the paucity of data is problematic at an international level. Referring to the "universal need" for after-school care, Kammerman (1980) concluded: "No country provides adequate coverage or even has systematic data indicating where children of this age are cared for now" (p. 27).

Parental Satisfaction with Self-Care

Reporting on results of a survey from respondents to a questionnaire in Working Mother designed by Dr. Hyman Rodman, Leishman (1980) indicated that mothers in this sample felt that their self-care arrangements were, for the most part, satisfactory for them and their children. Rules for conduct were a "must" according to these parents for workable self-care arrangements. Kieffer (1981), from an informal survey in South Kingstown, RI, came to the conclusion that "The latchkey experience does not, in itself, create problems" (p. 28). Newsweek (1981) indicated that age and SES are external factors that influence how well self-care can work.

Many mothers report positive consequences from self-care arrangements. Maturity, increased self-reliance, more responsible behavior, a wiser use of time, and increased skill in decision-making are seen as by-products of self-care for children (Kieffer, 1981; Leishman, 1980). At the same

time, concerns and problems are also part of the experience. Garbino (1981) has identified four areas of risk for children in self-care: they will feel badly (alone or neglected), act badly (fight with siblings, get into mischief), develop badly (do poorly in school), or be treated badly (be harmed by strangers).

Effects of Self-Care

Kieffer (1981) reported from a review of the literature that "sociological research has not been able to keep pace with the latchkey explosion." However, based on available data (Hoffman, 1974), there are no significant differences between children of working mothers and nonworking mothers in "intelligence, personal development, school achievement, social adjustment, ideas or attitudes" (p. 31).

Rodman (in Leishman, 1980) concluded from a study with matched samples of 48 self-care children and 48 children not in self-care that "Generally there is very little difference in the way both sets of children function with family and friends at school" (p. 25).

Psychologists (Long, 1981; Newsweek, 1981) disagree on long-term effects of self-care arrangements for children. Negative effects that have been identified as possible consequences include a stunting of emotional and social growth due to a lack of contact with parents or a feeling of being cheated out of attention by being on their own much of the time. Positive effects include fostering independence,

resiliency, and trust in children, and providing a balance to our society's tendency to overprotect and coddle our offspring.

Children's Perception of Self-Care

Based on limited data, children's perceptions of self-care arrangements appear to be highly variable. While some children seem to thrive on increased responsibility and enjoy being independent and alone (Keiffer, 1981; Leishman, 1980; Newsweek, 1981), others experience extreme anxiety, feelings of isolation and fear during the hours they look after themselves (Long, 1981).

In summary, a review of recent literature and social science abstracts indicates no published data from empirical studies on children in self-care arrangements. The purpose of this study is to provide descriptive and analytical data on the extent of self-care, the satisfaction level for parents and children with self-care arrangements, and the variables that influence it. Family policy makers are compelled to provide the impetus necessary to fill the void of empirical data in this area. "Self-care arrangements are not necessarily the answer. But they are a fact of life for a growing number of American families" (Leishman, 1980, p. 25).

Methodology

Sample

The population identified for this study was 356 fifth-grade students and 319 third-grade students attending

Newington Elementary School in Summerville, South Carolina. This population is approximately 12% black and negatively skewed on SES (Burrell, 1982). The sample utilized to address the research question, what is the extent of children in self-care arrangements? was those students who returned questionnaires filled out by their parents indicating the type of care arrangement provided for the children during hours they are not in school. A subsample of those parents who returned questionnaires indicating they have children in self-care arrangements provided data addressing the research questions: How satisfied are parents with self-care arrangements for their children? and What are the variables that contribute to parental satisfaction with self-care arrangements?

A subsample of 20 children, 10 fifth graders and 10 third graders, 5 boys and 5 girls in each grade, was chosen from those students whose parents indicated through their questionnaires that they are in self-care arrangements. This subsample was utilized to address the research questions: How satisfied are children with their self-care arrangements? and What are the variables that contribute to children's satisfaction with self-care arrangements? This subsample and their parents (through their questionnaires) was utilized to address the research question: Are there significant differences between levels of satisfaction for children and their parents?

Data Collection

Conversations with principal, Mike Burrell, of Newington Elementary School, confirmed his support of the research project and secured the cooperation of teachers during data collection. A letter (Appendix A) was hand-addressed and signed and delivered to each participating teacher on Monday, March 1, one week prior to sending out questionnaires.

The following Monday, March 8, questionnaires (Appendix C) with a cover letter (Appendix B) drawn up by the TOM (Dillman, 1978) were sent home with third- and fifth-graders with verbal instructions to children matching written ones to parents to return questionnaires the following day. Teachers were provided extra questionnaires in case of loss and were encouraged to give students a second chance to participate in the survey in case of mishap. An incentive of an ice cream party was offered for those classes who achieved a 75% response rate by Wednesday, March 10.

Questionnaires were collected and counted Tuesday and Wednesday mornings. Wednesday, the subsample of 20 children (10 from each grade) was drawn from those children in self-care arrangements, and their parents were contacted to secure permission to interview the children. The children's interviews (Appendix D) were conducted in 15-minute segments Thursday and Friday of that week.

Results

Students in the third-grade classes returned 97% of their questionnaires. Abstentions and invalid questionnaires

resulted in a response rate (based on questionnaires yielding analyzable data) of 89.5% for this grade level (N = 265).

Fifth graders returned 88% of their questionnaires. Based on the same requirements as identified for the third grade, response rate was 74.7% for this group (N = 255).

Extent of self-care varied by grade level of students, although the percent of full-time employed mothers remained relatively constant. For the third graders, 40.8% of mothers reported full-time employment, 46.6% were not employed, and 12.6% had part-time jobs. Children in care arrangements (N = 137) were divided into two groups: in the third grade (N = 61), 45% were in daycare or cared for in their homes by someone other than their parent or in a caregiver's home; 55% were in self-care arrangements (alone or with a sibling 17 years old or younger). Children in self-care arrangements (N = 33) accounted for 14.2% of the third-grade population returning valid questionnaires.

Among fifth-graders returning useable questionnaires, 38.7% of mothers were working full-time, 19.8% part-time, and 41.5% not working. Children in self-care arrangements (N = 58) accounted for 76.3% of children in all care arrangements (N = 76) and for 22.7% of all children in the fifth-grade sample.

Satisfaction for both children and parents was measured on a 5-point scale ranging from 1 = very satisfied, to 5 = very dissatisfied. Parental satisfaction scores, based on completed questionnaires from parents using self-care

(N = 68), were normally distributed, although negatively skewed, with a mean of 2.2 and a standard deviation of 1.1. Children in the third-grade subsample of 10 had a mean satisfaction score of 2.6 and a standard deviation of 1.1. Children in the fifth-grade subsample reported slightly lower levels of satisfaction resulting in a mean of 3.0 and a standard deviation of 1. There were no significant differences between satisfaction levels for third- or fifth-grade students and their parents.

Five independent variables, (1) amount of time spent weekly in self-care, (2) sex of child, (3) grade level, (4) presence of sibling, and (5) voluntary or involuntary use of self-care were selected for multiple regression analysis, attempting to explain variance in the dependent variable, parental satisfaction. Stepwise multiple regression indicated that these variables accounted for 34% of the variance in parental satisfaction level, with the largest portion, 29%, being taken up by the variable voluntary or involuntary use of self-care arrangements. Sex of child accounted for 2.7% and amount of time spent weekly in self-care, 1.6% of the variance.

Differences in mean satisfaction scores for children were tested for significance between boys and girls, children with siblings present and those without, and third- and fifth-graders. There were no significant differences found for any of these groups.

Discussion

The return rate (N = 564) of questionnaires was impressive for both grade levels, but especially the third grade, which returned 97% of their questionnaires. Dillman's TDM method was followed throughout, with careful attention to motivating parents to respond and return questionnaires by hand addressing and signing all correspondence and careful structuring of the cover letter. The survey was conducted under the umbrella of the Family Research Center, and cover letters and envelopes carried their letterhead. Although the above effort was directed by the literature on effecting response rate, intuition gained from 9 years in elementary schools and casual conversations with students and teachers lead this researcher to believe the incentive (ice cream party) was responsible for the return rate. The difference between third- and fifth-grade return rates is hypothesized to be attributable to the inverse relationship between reward value of ice cream and age of student.

A second factor influencing return rate may have been the organizational prowess of the third-grade teachers as a group compared to the teachers of the fifth grade. The principal mentioned this phenomenon on several occasions, and it was obviously at work during the day of the children's interviews. Both factors have implications for future research in school settings.

The response rate (N = 520) based on questionnaires with useable data was influenced by parents refusing to participate

in the survey, 6.2% (N = 32) overall, and by questionnaires which were invalid due to confusing or illegible answers, 2.3% (N = 12). Reasons for refusal to participate included "questions too personal," "not in favor of federal aid to day care," and "I don't want anyone knowing where my kids are after school." Again, these responses indicate an area needing attention in future research directed to this population.

The extent of self-care arrangements in this population was more extensive than figures based on children nationwide from 7 to 13. The Current Population Survey conducted in 1974 reported 7% of all children were in self-care arrangements, 13% if the mother was in the labor force and 18% if the mother was a single parent head of household and in the labor force (Rodman, 1977). This study found 14.2% (N = 33) of third-graders and 22.7% (N = 58) of all fifth-graders spending some time in self-care arrangements on a regular basis. In cases where mothers were in the work force on a full- or part-time basis (3rd N = 140, 5th N = 145), the figure for children in self-care rose to 23.6% for third-graders and 40% for fifth-graders. Where mothers are single parents and in the labor force (3rd N = 18, 5th N = 19), it is 55.5% for third, and 68.4% for fifth-grade children. Results from this population indicate that self-care for each category is more extensive in 1982 than in 1974, and that as children grow older, parnnts are more willing to use this type of care.

As measured on a 5-point scale, the majority of parents indicated moderate to high levels of satisfaction with self-care arrangements for their children (Table 1). The variables chosen for the multiple regression analysis predicted only a small (34%) of the variance. Although as illustrated in Table 2 parents were twice as likely to use self-care for a child in the fifth rather than the third grade, and for a child who had a sibling present than without, apparently neither of these variables had an impact on satisfaction level. The only sex difference worth noting is that there were twice as many third-grade boys as girls in self-care. The one variable that accounted for most of the variance was whether parents chose self-care arrangements because they or their child preferred this type of care (voluntary) or because cost or convenience or something else forced this decision (involuntary). Although this predictor was statistically significant, substantive significance is more difficult to claim. A tautological relationship between free choice and satisfaction can be argued which would negate the impact of this variable as a predictor.

Clearly other variables and a more reliable scale for measuring satisfaction are needed to investigate the question of parental satisfaction with self-care arrangements. Tables 3 and 4 provide additional and perhaps more revealing information concerning parental attitudes about self-care based on personal experiences.

Table 1

Percentage of Parents and Children by Level of Satisfaction by Grade Level

	Very Satisfied	Mostly Satisfied	Satisfied	Somewhat Dissatisfied	Very Dissatisfied
	1	2	3	4	5
All parents (N = 68)	35.3	23.5	25	14.7	1
Third Grade (N = 10)	30	20	40	10	
Third Grade Parents (N = 10)	50	10	30		10
Fifth Grade (N = 10)		20	60	20	
Fifth Grade Parents (N = 10)	30	30	10	30	

Table 2

Percentage of Children in Self-Care Arrangements by Amount of Time Spent Weekly in Self-Care, Sex of Child, Presence of Sibling, Voluntary or Involuntary Use of Self-Care; by Grade Level

	Average Time	Sex		Sibling		Voluntary	
	Weekly	M	F	Yes	No	Yes	No
Third grade (N=22)	7.7	68.1	31.9	63.6	36.4	50	50
	R=2-30						
Fifth grade (N=46)	10.3	47.8	52.3	67.4	32.6	47.8	52.3
Total Average	9 hours	54.4	45.6	66.2	33.8	48.5	51.5

Table 3

Percentage of Parents by Worries About Self-Care

	Emergencies	Discipline	Security	School Work	Sibling Fights	Lack of Time Together
Percent of Parents (N=68)	22	5	17	7	7	7

Table 4

Percentage of Parents by Positive Results of Self-Care

	Responsibility	New Skills	Wise Use of Time	Independence	Teamwork	Trust
Percent of Parents (N=68)	90	29	36	15	8	5

Children tended to be somewhat less satisfied with their self-care arrangements than parents (Table 1) but not significantly so. Also, the researcher felt some inclination for children to choose the midpoint (3) was at work during their choice of satisfaction level. For children, as parents, more reliable measures of satisfaction are needed for valid research in this area. Small N's (10) were perhaps a factor in the lack of significant differences in satisfaction levels of boys and girls, those with siblings and without, and third-graders and fifth-graders.

Table 5 indicates that, as with parents, children perceive their self-care arrangements as having both positive and negative aspects. Sibling fights and fear of strangers calling or coming to the house were most frequently mentioned as negative aspects of self-care. Positive aspects included enjoying being alone and on their own, as well as pleasant and fun interactions with siblings ("when they're in a good mood").

When asked to indicate their preferred type of care from five choices, self-care and staying with a friend were the two most popular responses (Table 6). Age was a factor here, as third-graders chose staying with friends over self-care 2 to 1, and fifth-graders reversed the order.

Conclusion

The extent of self-care arrangements discovered in this population encourages, if not demands, further research in this area. The positive relationship demonstrated between

Table 5

Percentage of Children in Self-Care Arrangements by Positive and Negative Perceptions of Self-Care by Grade Level

	Negative				Positive	
	Sibling Fights	Miss Parents	Strangers	Bored	Like Independence	Enjoy Siblings
Third Grade (N=10)	40	20	50		40	20
Fifth Grade (N=10)	60		30	20	40	30

Table 6

Percentage of Children in Self-Care Arrangements by Choice of Care Arrangement by Grade Level

	Self-care	Babysitter	Friend's Home	Day Care	Other
	1	2	3	4	5
Third Grade (N=10)	30		60		10 (Mom)
Fifth Grade (N=10)	60		30		10 (Mom)

working mothers, single parents, and self-care arrangements for children suggests that this type of care will increase in the future.

The use of a school system as a sampling frame was demonstrated in this study to be an efficient and cost-effective way to gather data. Future use of schools suggests two considerations for researchers: (1) The school and its clientele should benefit from the data. Based on this study, parental and children's concerns and also their positive perceptions of self-care indicate a framework for skills, attitudes, and general knowledge that would help children and their parents to have better experiences and fewer concerns about self-care arrangements. Such a learning module could be developed and exchanged for data collecting privileges within school systems. (2) The school and its clientele should have a positive experience during the research process. Public relations work through the PTA, administrators, and community media would inform participants of the goals and objectives of the research effort and encourage participation and disclosure.

Of the many research questions to be explored in this area, perhaps the one to be addressed initially should be: What do children do during the hours they are in self-care? Answering this question with quantitative data will begin to answer a second research question which has policy implications: Is self-care harmful to children and families? If data support an affirmative answer, the next research question

dictated is: What can communities offer as an alternative to self-care arrangements?

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